



TANF Rural Communities Initiative

OVERVIEW

Background

The face of poverty in America is often perceived to exist in a predominantly urban setting; yet, since 1959, families in rural environments have experienced higher poverty rates than their counterparts in America's cities.¹ While only fourteen (14) percent of the *national* Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) caseload live in non-metro communities, rural States experience a very different reality – with as many as three-quarters of their TANF caseload living outside urban areas.² TANF clients face severe challenges to becoming self-sufficient such as less favorable employment opportunities, lower-paying jobs, health care, food security, transportation, and child care. Rural TANF agencies at the State, Tribal, and local levels also need support and technical assistance in meeting the higher work participation requirements under the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005. Given the continued scale of poverty and limited job opportunities in rural areas, it is important to continue supporting programs that reduce barriers to employment and strengthen delivery of social services to low-income families.

Definitions

There are several key stakeholders, assumptions, and definitions in this Initiative. These are described below.

Rural TANF Site. A TANF-administering agency that serves an area/region with a population of 25,000 or less, possesses minimal organizational capacity to participate in the Initiative, and is six hours or less driving distance from a major airport. OFA regions will identify agencies that qualify for technical assistance based on these guidelines.

Promising Practice Site. A TANF or other social support administering entity with identified promising practices that may be replicable in a rural TANF site. These sites will engage in peer to peer learning with the rural TANF sites and share progress and successes as they each work to improve program components.

Rural Specialists. Academics and practitioners identified as specialists in rural poverty issues.

Overview of Initiative

The Rural Communities Initiative will provide States, Tribes, and local TANF agencies in 16 rural sites the opportunity to share information and promising practices on critical rural issues and barriers to employment such as education, job skills, transportation, and child care. The Initiative will provide a variety of technical assistance to 16 **rural TANF sites**. These organizations will be supported with the following types of technical assistance:

- Participation in a 2 ½ to 3 day Rural Communities Academy to be held in September 2008
- On site expert consultation
- Site visits, exchanges, and assessments
- Individualized technical assistance plan with follow up support
- A 1 ½ day Rural Leadership Forum
- Webinars, teleconferences, and online Community of Practice
- Online and hard copy resources that detail promising rural TANF program strategies and techniques

Additional targeted training and technical assistance will be provided to the 16 selected rural TANF sites throughout the project timeline. A series of follow-up Web casts, Webinars, and teleconferences will also be held to continue the dialogue and peer-to-peer learning opportunities around critical rural TANF issues identified by participating sites. Additionally, a Rural Specialists panel consisting of key policy, research, and practitioners in rural TANF issues will provide guidance and expertise throughout the development and implementation of this Initiative.

¹ Rural Sociological Society. (2006). *The Challenges of Rural Poverty*. RSS Issue Brief – Challenges for Rural America in the Twenty-First Century, Number 2, January 2006. <http://www.ruralsociology.org/briefs/brief2.pdf>

² Government Accountability Office. (2004). *Welfare Reform – Rural TANF Programs have Developed Many Strategies to Address Rural Challenges*. United States Government Accountability Office. <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d04921.pdf>



TANF Rural Communities Initiative

OVERVIEW

Rural Communities Academy

This 2 ½- 3 day Academy will bring together 4-5 representatives from each of the rural sites selected for technical assistance, selected representatives from the promising practice sites, and state and Federal TANF program representatives for a facilitated information gathering and action planning event. Workshops and plenary sessions with members of the Rural Specialists panel, to include expert policymakers, researchers, and practitioners, will provide all stakeholders the opportunity to gather information and resources on meeting the challenges of moving rural TANF participants into higher levels of self-sufficiency. By participating in outcome-focused action planning, Academy participants will also address programmatic and policy challenges in moving forward to better address the needs of rural TANF clients and the requirements of TANF agencies to increase work participation rates under the Deficit Reduction Act. Specifically, the 16 rural TANF sites will work with Rural Specialist Panel members, representatives of promising practices in rural areas from across the United States, and other facilitators to create individualized technical assistance (TA) plans as a roadmap for their implementation of new ideas and strategies informed by their Academy experience.

Rural Leadership Forum

The Rural Communities Leadership Forum will serve as the capstone event of the Initiative. Representatives of the 16 rural TANF sites, promising practice sites, and Rural Specialists Panel will come together to share lessons learned, successes garnered from the implementation of the Rural TANF sites' TA plans, and design final action plans.

On-going Technical Assistance (Webinars and Topical Conference Calls)

Periodic topic-specific Web Casts/Webinars will be provided to TA recipients. These Web casts/Webinars will allow the 16 rural TANF sites to virtually attend a presentation/workshop where presenters explore relevant topics in-depth, share information, and allow for dialogue amongst presenters and TA recipients.

A series of conference calls will be led by content specialists and ICF staff moderators on content areas or topics identified by the 16 rural TANF sites. Each conference call will also include an interactive question and answer session.

The 16 rural TANF sites will also participate in facilitated site visits where rural specialists, Federal/contractor staff, and promising program peers will provide on-site consultation. Site exchanges will serve as intensive training opportunities for the 16 rural TANF sites to replicate aspects of innovative programming being implemented at promising practice sites.

Community of Practice

A Community of Practice will be developed to provide a shared electronic space where Rural Community Initiative participants can share and review documents, exchange ideas and dialogue via questions and answers. This resource will be a password-protected environment that fosters continued collaboration and problem solving.

Outcomes of Initiative

The 16 selected Rural TANF sites will be provided with:

- Technical assistance and resources to aid them in increasing their work participation rates;
- Support and guidance in creating and designing programs that reduce barriers to employment and strengthen delivery of social services to low-income families in rural areas;
- The opportunity to develop solutions and an action plan to better address the needs of TANF families living in rural settings through peer-to-peer dialogue and a collaborative learning environment;
- Ongoing technical assistance such as site visits, site exchanges, Webinars, an online Community of Practice and teleconferences, to continue facilitating collaboration and exchange of ideas; and
- Development of an online toolkit and supporting flipbook that will disseminate promising practices and strategies for serving rural TANF clients, in a format that will be user-friendly and easily accessible to a broad audience of States, Territories, and Tribal entities.

For more information on the Technical Assistance for the Rural Communities Initiative, please contact
James Butler at (202) 401-9284 or james.butler@acf.hhs.gov or
Lisa Washington-Thomas at (202) 401-5141 or lwashington-thomas@acf.hhs.gov